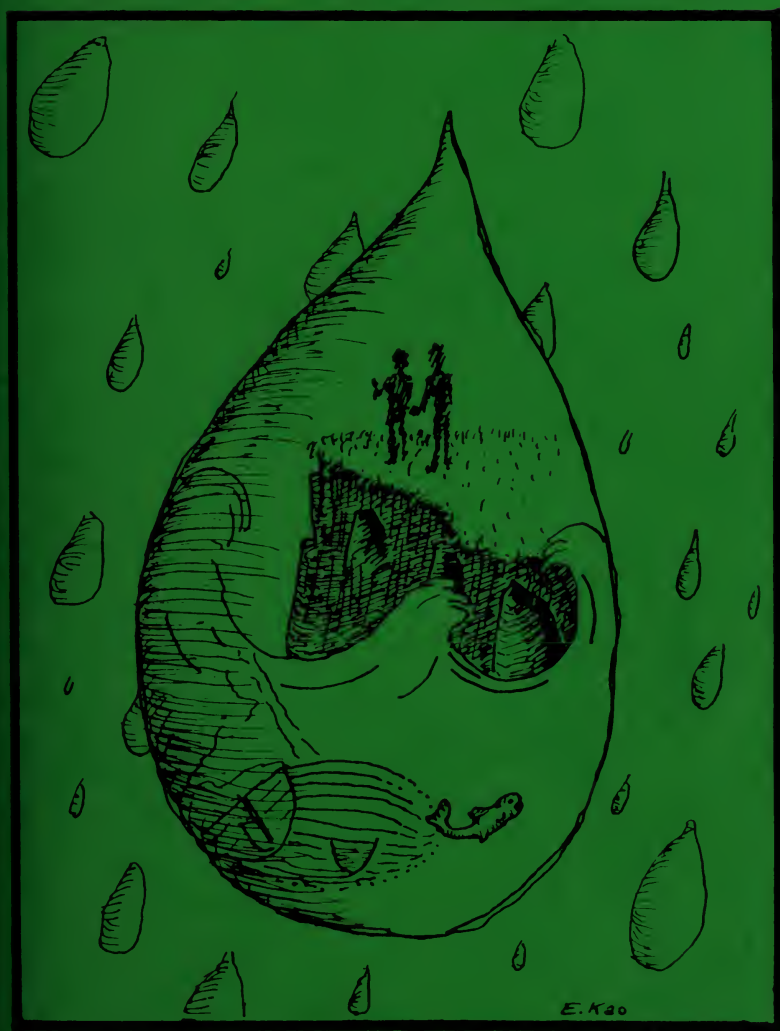


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The Courant



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The Courier

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-Notice-

Due to the high quality of short fiction submissions, the Spring Term issue is devoted to short fiction.

Although this issue of *The Courant* is composed of fiction only, *The Courant* will include poetry in the upcoming issue and we welcome submissions of poetry.

Save the Manatees

I saw some magic in the way my grandfather's truck moved across the frozen surface of Lake Minnetonka. In the east, where I was raised, few dared to venture out upon the frozen depths, nor were there many lakes to facilitate such craziness. And when a lonesome winter brought my mother and me back to Mound, I was amazed when my grandfather's wagoneer climbed from the road onto the frozen lake.

"She's dead," my mother informed me over the phone." I never thought it would happen."

Nor did I. My grandmother had stood through tornadoes, seven childbirths, and diabetes. And then she falls to swarming bees. I couldn't understand it; I still can't. But the quick, definite nature of her death made it easier for all of us. We never had a chance to sit by her bedside and let latent memories come to the surface. We couldn't even mourn over her corpse; it was too ugly. The bees had made it quick and clean.

I was in Isla Morada, Florida, when she died. I was glad to be so far away from Mound and the icy lakes; it made it easier. I occupied myself with the manatees and my wildlife tours.

That's how I met Darryl. His boat was next to mine at the dock. He took people bonefishing and I took them to the mangroves. We both hated the people.

I remember the last time that my grandfather took me ice fishing. It was late winter and the lake was thawing.

When the truck bounced onto the ice, I did not hear the familiar crunch of hard snow, but the hollowing splash of water. I glanced at his thick, aged hands upon the steering wheel and found safety for a moment. But when I squinted at the glaring pools of water that rested on the lakes surface, I sank deep into my seat. I remembered a time before when the lake was in such a condition; I had looked at my grandfather to find comfort. But my grandfather had grown human as I had grown older. I could no longer hide within the wrinkles on the side of his head or the silver glimmer of his crowned tooth.

"Grampa, Pitch to me," I had often said beneath the kitchen table with a dented ball and bat in my fat hands. He would would trade smiles with my mother over the morning paper and then he would stand. We would walk upon the well-tended grass until we were a safe distance from the apple trees. Grandma was watching from the kitchen window. He would throw the ball until I hit it deep into the tall grass. He would yell "homerun," and then recede into the house while I scavenged in the weeds.

Years later, my grandfather and I would reminisce about past summers when Darryl and I came to visit the winter after my grandmother's death. Darryl was uncomfortable in the snow and cold of the Minnesota winter, as he was a native of the Florida Keys. He couldn't find shelter in the house and

the memories as I could. So he secluded himself in our room late into the afternoon reading his cheap detective novels.

The next morning I would wake him early and drag him outside. The soft noise of the falling snow was the only sound I could hear. I took Darryl out on the lake where snow whipped our faces. I was happy. But Darryl was not; he shivered and stumbled in the deepening snow. Suddenly I wished we hadn't come, because out on the barren, white lake, I felt no love for my husband, only pity. The next day we would leave. "A hurricane's coming," I would tell my grandfather. I wasn't lying.

The last time I went fishing with my grandfather, he stopped the truck near a cluster of fisherman who huddled over their holes. They reminded me of those sorrowful men that I had seen in the movies who slouched over glasses of whiskey as if the face of a lost love hung in the dense liquid. Their heads remained low as my grandfather passed. He and his fishing partner Vodiker walked about the ice, stepping over deserted holes that were camouflaged by windswept snow. They stopped near a patch of holes that lay thirty feet from the truck. There Vodiker dropped the bucket and my grandfather called for me to come over. I followed their exact path. They laughed loudly at my uneasiness.

By the time we dropped our lines into the lake, the sun was fading behind the trees along the shoreline, allowing the chill of the ice to rise around us. It was colder than I had expected.

I started to pace in an attempt to warm my chilled feet.

"Didn't see you at the funeral yesterday," my grandfather said through the side of his mouth.

Vodiker squinted at the dropping sun. "Didn't know of any funeral this week. Who died?"

"Luaren Ebert."

Vodiker paused for a moment, looking down through the ice. "Don't know the name."

My grandfather looked up at Vodiker.

"Embolism," he said tersely.

Vodiker looked surprised by the word. He shook his jigging stick so that the line danced in the water. The murmur of the distant groups of fisherman filled the silence. I watched the huddled figures in search of activity, but all was quiet. No one seemed to be catching fish.

"Grandma's going blind," my mother had whispered with a quivering lip. "It's her diabetes."

The next summer grandma would be blind. We saw it immediately when we got off the plane. She did not smile; just hung on Grandpa's arm, listening to the greetings around her. I would wonder when she went blind and what she saw last. Did she wake up blind? Did she blink and reopen her eyes to the nothingness? I knew these things couldn't happen, but I liked to think about them. I imagined my grandmother's point of view as her vision faded. I saw a blackness begin to creep over the things I loved-- the

birdfeeder and my husband. The darkness crept further over my vision; I felt that I was sinking into the back of my head. I could see my husband's dark figure fade. When I wake the next day, I might as well keep my eyes closed and pretend to sleep.

. . . During the past few weeks, I have spent long nights alone, waiting for the single headlight of my husband's truck to shine through the brush. When it doesn't, he says he spent the night fixing the Lucky III. But I know better; the hurricane went north of us. I hate that Boat. "It keeps us running," he says. "We'd die without my charter." When I came here eight years ago to save the manatees, I never thought I'd be dependent on fish meat. . .

I watched my bobber descend into the dark water, not realizing the meaning of it's movement.

"Looks like you've got something on line," my grandfather said calmly.

I jumped up, grabbing the jig clumsily. I fumbled with the line as I pulled it from the water.

"Little shit," my grandfather said observing the fish that hung from the end of the line.

I flashed a smile as I swiftly grabbed the perch by the belly. It seemed surprised by my hand, for it jerked belatedly in my fingers. I bent down towards the water's surface to replace it.

"Don't throw it back," my grandfather roared. "We've got plenty of those suckers in the lake. Throw it on the ice."

I obeyed, heaving the fish towards a cold puddle. I watched as it wriggled in the air and slapped the water. Soon after nightfall, the water on the lake would freeze; I hoped the fish would die before then.

I huddled near the hole, pulling my frozen feet close to my body. The minnow impaled on my hook looked dead on the ice. I picked it up gingerly, afraid that it would fall apart in my hands. I removed it from the hook with my back to my grandfather and then quickly threw the line into the water.

My eyes darted as the ice moaned. A few winter's before, my mother had told me about this sound; she said that it had something to do with the ice refreezing. My grandfather seemed oblivious to the noises as he remained hunched over his hole, staring into the water. I sighed loudly and rubbed my hands together, trying to hint at my discomfort. My grandfather rubbed his head.

Vodiker looked up. "How many fish did you say you caught by this time yesterday. It's gotta be more than we've got now."

"Six, seven," my grandfather mumbled.

My grandfather looked angry. His brow was furrowed and his eyes jumped over me when he looked towards the shore. He stood up, grabbed the empty bucket, and walked towards the car. Vodiker saw the signal and began to pull his line from the water.

"Looks like the old man's had enough," he said. "Better get your jig ready."

The car was warm. Leaving was the best part of fishing with my grandfather. I hated the ice and the fish and the silence. "Why does he come out here," I thought. The numbness was leaving my body.

Now my mother calls about Darryl and I.

"It's a phase," she says. "Your father and I went through the same thing thirty-five years ago and look how happy we are today."

But I know better. I came to Isla Morada to save the manatees. That says it all. We feel in love with the reef, the birds, and the bars as all tourists do. And then we thought we were in love. What we were in love with was the sun and the beaches, not each other. And when the snow whirled around us on lake Minnetonka, I saw our mistake. Those perch drove me to it so long ago and now those stupid manatees have screwed me the same.

Now I am curled on the bed, away from the window. My eyelids are fluttering and I want to let them fall. I don't care about the headlight, the boat, or the manatees. If the bees swarmed around me right now, I would let them sting me so that my face bulged and my eyes swelled shut. And when my husband came home, he'd drift into bed without noticing. He would think I was pretending to sleep.

Soon we were off the ice. I watched the headlights of

the car flash upon houses and people. I looked at my grandfather and then at the darkness. Suddenly he is gone. I feel the warmth that my husband has left on the bed. I hate that boat. But I let him go. It seems to numb his pain.

Lucas Edwards

Moonwalk

Carla was different from all the other third grade girls who sat quietly in their neatly pressed tunics and starched white cotton shirts, pretending that the itchy wool and tight knee socks didn't bother them, stupidly intent on hiding their discomfort. Their mousy blond and sandy brown hair falling out of the bright poodle barrettes they wore with such pride, they patiently waited for the teacher to arrive, their soft pink hands covering their freshly scrubbed white knees. As soon as I saw Carla, I was glad that I had refused to take a bath and chosen to save my barrettes for another day, my limp brown hair hidden in a tight braid, my fingernails and knees stained with rich, black dirt.

It was more than just her blackness that drew me to Carla. True, it was her deep ebony skin that first caught my eyes, nervously scanning the room for a real smile or a friendly face, even a hint of recognition. The room was neither new nor foreign to me - I had spent the year before learning "*mes multiplications et les prépositions*" with Mme. Martine, across the hall. However, I had never really caught on to the "*a , après, avant , avec...*" song and the thought of hiding my skin, bronzed from the bright summer sun and bruised from months of riding bikes and climbing trees with the boys, under layers of plaid had been anything but appealing. Thrilled to find an interesting face amidst the sea

of little princesses, sitting angelically on their thrones, their cute button noses pointed awkwardly towards the sky, I sat down at a desk in the back corner, next to Carla. While the others sat stiffly in their orange plastic chairs, future nuns waiting to say their morning prayers and received God's benediction, terrified of cracking their molds of perfection, Carla showed me her elbow, a rough, crusty scab failing to seal her wound and prevent the yellowish puss from oozing out. No longer feeling shame in their ugliness, I exposed my knuckles, disfigured by deep gashes, purple scabs and dried blood. Taking pleasure in the disgusted, squeamish looks of the other girls, I proudly remembered aloud that I had not even cried when the doctor scrubbed the deep wounds, removing the dirt and bits of gravel that hid in my raw flesh. Obviously impressed, Carla smiled at me. She even took my hand in the line at recess, gently, careful not to aggravate my injury.

While the other girls played jump rope, chinese elastic, and ballon-chasseur, away from the puddles and earth that threatened to dirty their creamy skin, Carla and I sat up on the little hill, in the moist grass. *Assise sur la petite colline*. No one bothered us up on that little hill, free to think up games of our own or make music with the thick blades of grass, and no one ever asked if we wanted to join in their games. I didn't mind though. I knew that they were just jealous - the pretty poodle barrettes looked so nice in Carla's hair; their green,

blue and purple teeth biting happily into her thick hair, so dark it glowed. Besides, no one could moonwalk the way Carla could. Sometimes Carla would try to fix my hair just like hers, but my stringy strands would slip right out of the barrettes and hang lifelessly down my back. Carla told me I was pretty anyway, her dark almond eyes softening as she said it. I believed her.

Racing Carla to our favorite tree, a giant oak up on the hill, I fell one day, my knee hitting the hard pavement, my delicate skin tearing as it rubbed against the uneven surface. Concentrating on the deep ruby blood that trickled slowly down my leg, meandering, I willed myself not to cry. Still, the moisture accumulated in my eyes. Sensing my struggle, and my embarrassment, Carla dropped to her knees beside me, allowing the cement to thrash her knee as it had mine. Wincing from our torn flesh, we watched them fall.

Blood sisters, we sat together for hours every day, talking as I played with her hair, black and thick as mine would never be. I taught her how to play the recorder and she taught me how to walk on my hands. Mostly though, we just talked. Especially about Michael Jackson. Carla wanted to have his children; I just wanted to learn how to moonwalk. Downing her Pepsi as her feet magically glided backwards, Carla promised to make me as cool as she was.

Heather Birks

The Voice of the Sea

The sand sang under his feet with a hollow squeaking sound like cicadas or rubbing dinner glasses together. He took the time to listen as he walked diagonally across the beach on an oblique path from the road and the break in the fence to the water. The squeak came not when he first put a foot down but when he shifted his weight onto it. His heel came down first, then the outside edge of his foot, and finally the weight, coming down onto his inside toes and the ball of his foot: squeak. It was a rolling motion, he felt the roundness in his bare-feet, in their step, roll, squeak, step, roll, squeak.

The sun was still trapped in the sand an hour after it went down. He felt the last traces of warmth in every footstep. The top layer of sand cooled down, heat sucked away by the night air, but underneath when his foot sank in and squeaked he felt the warm memory of the sunlight.

He knew the ocean as well would still be warm from the sun. The air was actually pleasant now, cooler and breezy like walking through great sheets of silk. During the day he could smell a burning in the sun-scorched air, and the sand was like hot coals, so he wore sandals and hurried to get into the water. At night the beach changed: the sand became cool with only the slightest hint of its unbearable heat hiding under the surface, and the ocean was almost as warm as the air.

He walked feeling individual grains of sand sticking to

the soles of his feet, the sand soft like cloth when it stayed in the carpet of beach but jagged when it separated and bit into his arch and heel in little bits. How long had it been since the flecks of sand on his feet had been big rocks, he wondered, and thought of rocks ground to dust by an inexorable glacier or simply chipped away at in the back-and-forth washing of pebbles under the sea.

Crossing through the shadow of a life guard's chair, cast undulating across the sand by the weak blue-white fluorescence of a street lamp, he came down to that darker strip of moist sand, on which the sea fights its constant land-war with the beach, always pushing forward in assault and always driven back again, foaming and sputtering. He liked the ceaseless futility of it. When he felt the sand change, he stopped, examining it with its feet. Here near the ocean, the sand was clammy and felt like the night. He thought, if night were sand it would feel like this, like sand still wet with the memory of the tide.

Spreading out from beyond the farthest end of the beach, a glow lit the night almost like dawn, but it was only light-pollution from Boston. The electric, office-building, billboard, high-rise, unsleeping, concrete world of the city casting its reflection in the low-hanging sky. He watched tattered clouds scudding high-up through the blurred fingers of city light, and walked down to the water.

"Shit," his friend Ray exclaimed walking beside him.

"What," he said carelessly, feeling the last foam of a wave crawl over his toes.

"I cut my foot up on some broken glass."

"You think I want to hear about it?" Ray could always trap him into speech, even when his own voice sounded loud and harsh and out of place. The smell of salt and sea-weed was in his nose, and the water came up over his feet again and shrank, muttering, away again.

"You heartless fucker," said Ray and bent to examine his foot. When he stood up, he had a flat rock in his hand and with a flick of his wrist sent it dancing across the surface of the calmer water beyond the breaking waves.

"I think that was twelve," Ray declared looking to him for agreement or skepticism or whatever response he might have.

"Mm." He refused to commit himself.

But Ray would not let him off that easily, saying "What's the most skips you ever got?" and he had to answer, so he said, "I don't know. Ten or twelve."

It was eleven. He remembered the rock he had thrown, one day alone on the beach: a flat black stone with one jagged edge, firing it out from his hip like a gun-fighter drawing in a duel. Watching it skip and skip and skip again, he knew it was a good one and his eye would lose count, so he listened to the stone slapping the water. When his eye did lose count in the stone's last diminishing hops before it sank,

and he thought it was ten or maybe twelve, he played the sound back to himself in his head, over and over, and counted slaps. Eleven, he had decided. It was the most he ever got.

Ray skipped more rocks, and he listened to the skip and splash of them and thought of them lying under the waves, all being washed back and forth by the ocean as it ground them slowly into sand.

Ray waded into the water and put his arm down to feel around on the bottom. He pulled up one of the hermit crabs that crawled around the bottom by the hundred. "You ever wonder how hermit crabs have sex? I mean, they're stuck in these shells all the time, so how do they get at each other?"

"Jesus Christ."

"No, seriously," said Ray.

This was too much for him, so he said, "Let's take a swim."

They stripped off their tee-shirts and waded into the surf in their shorts. He felt the water rising up his leg and spray hitting his face as the surf of a three or four foot wave sped past him up the beach.

"Man, my nuts are freezing," Ray called.

"Shut up," he said, but Ray had already dived under a breaking wave and was swimming out beyond the breakers, doing a leisurely back-stroke, his arms rising and falling, around and around like a windmill.

He stood watching Ray and waiting for the right wave

to dive into. Then suddenly he was in the water, plunging through the heart of a wave and feeling its tingle and kick as it pushed him up and back and he came out on the other side. As the next wave formed, swelling in front of him, he struck out without thinking, his arms flashing up over his head and biting down into the water. He felt the wave lift him, but he was beyond it before it crested and broke. In the calmer water he lay on his back and felt the ocean rising and falling beneath him, the gentle alternation of crest and trough like giant breathing, like the world asleep.

He listened to the swell and the roar of breaking waves and thought of the constant voice of the sea. The hush-hush of the surf rushing up the sand, and the mutter and sputtering suck as the ocean drew a wave back into itself. The rhythmic crash of waves breaking on the shore, and the steady roar that filled his ears when he plunged below the surface of the water, the salty sting in his eyes and on his lips. All the sounds of the sea joined into one voice, and the ocean's voice pulled him out of himself, and he knew all who had ever stood on the beach or floated on the sea and listened to that voice.

Having just read the *Odyssey* in class that spring, he found Odysseus, greatest of sailors, standing quiet in the bow of his ship, at long last in sight of his home on Ithaca, his weather-stained face attentive, still listening to the voice of the sea, though he was with it every moment of his life for the past twenty years.

And soldiers standing on the beach at Normandy, fresh off battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, the Second World War almost at its end, weighed down by packs and guns, and listening to the sea, many of them for the last time.

An Indian, standing quiet in the woods by the shore of an early America, before it was America, the beach stretched out before him in the morning fog, and he is waiting, maybe for deer, with his bow in his hand, or maybe for a friend or a woman. He hums quietly, matching the whisper of the calm, grey sea.

And he saw his mother coming down the narrow, weather-grayed stairs from the bluff to the shore below. When she was younger, and on a different beach, living on Nantucket island, with his father. They were married less than a year ago, and she is pregnant. It is the first time he hears the sea, a distant roaring beyond the womb, subtly underscoring the rhythmic thud of his mother's heartbeat, and she is also listening, with the special affinity of a mother for the ocean.

Then he knew of other wives and other mothers, hearing the menacing crash of waves breaking over and over, beating the shore with the same mercilessness they bestow on sailors, on husbands and sons, out for months and even years in their all too frail ships, built of wood and cloth and rope and the sweat and courage of men. As a young child on Nantucket, he had seen the balconies perched atop the roofs of shore-houses, "the widows' walks," his mother had told him,

where, in the days when Nantucket was one of the largest whaling ports in New England, wives and mothers had stood and paced and waited for their loved ones, taking no comfort (He found this almost unimaginable.) from the sea's swell and roar, but only a reminder that husbands and sons were absent and maybe dead, buried under the sea, its constant voice their only eulogy.

And then he must have been asleep because suddenly he was awake, and there was sea water flooding his mouth and biting into his nostrils. He jerked in surprise and tried to come upright, gasping for breath as his head broke the surface. A wave crashed over him, pounding him spinning toward the bottom. He twisted upside-down under water, lost his sense of direction, tried to come up for air. His lungs burned and he panicked but then found the air again and choked it into his lungs before another wave came at him and another. They pushed him toward the beach, and he flailed in the churning surf, trying not to breathe, his knees and elbows hitting the sand and rocks of the bottom.

He remembered the times with his sister when they would go to the neighbor's swimming pool, and sometimes have a contest trying to hold their breaths the longest. He always beat his sister, who was younger, waiting open-eyed under water till he saw her jump up gasping for air, then, seconds later, surging upward himself, splashing water everywhere as he drew in great laughing breaths.

He wondered how long he had been holding his breath, and another wave broke over him and around him and thrust him, dazed, up the beach. Finally he felt sand under his fingers, realized he was lying half in the water, and coughed, drawing shuddering breaths, and with his last strength dragged himself farther up the sand until the ocean only licked at his toes the way his dog always did, gently and with great affection.

Sleepy and unwilling to test his capacity for movement, he lay feeling the seeping tired ache in his body, and turned his head to watch the sea. Ray's glistening body flashed in the water, and he watched while his friend swam slowly and expectantly in toward the shore, and then, with a lunge and swooping arms caught the crest of a wave as it was breaking. For an instant he was poised at the top of the wave, and it drew itself up behind him, gathering its strength. Then with the long grace of the ocean, he shot forward, his body stiff, head tucked between outstretched arms, making a charging glide in with the wave, which foamed and sprayed around him but sent him in to the beach straight and hard.

Ray called, a long drawn-out howl, fractured by the water flying around him, and his voice mixed into the voice of the sea, the high animal howl weaving itself into the low roar, singing counterpoint to the steady heaving song of the waves and shifting tides, and the surf, cool and familiar on the soles of his bare feet.

Colin DeYoung

The Waiting

It was always warm in the Spring, and all the young kids would be spending their days outside playing with whatever they had, enjoying whatever life this small town had to offer. The days were long and the skies were assuming that deep, deep blue color that so joyously announced the coming of the intense summer.

What I really enjoyed were the small flowers that sprang up after the long rains that frequently struck my town. White, red, violet, and blue appeared from under old vases, abandoned cars, and the leftover cannons that would not be used.

Then there were the Silan mountains, protecting the town the same way a roughed up bulldog would do with his owner. The trees covered them all, except for the tiny tip that was only dry and lifeless rocks.

The town was very small, small enough for everyone to almost know everyone else. There were small, narrow streets throughout the place, with low buildings lined up on both sides. The balconies faced each other, and often women would sit out and chat along for hours, gossiping while they knitted. There were several stores, but time was making their appearance an embarrassment to all the inhabitants. The rust and termites were devouring the places, but the storekeepers had no such thing as competition

to worry about. It was no time for competition.

The aroma of the freshly baked bread, of the strong and powerful espressos being drunk by the tired men sitting on their balconies, and the intense and thick odor of woods burning in the closeby countryside spread throughout the streets, carried forth a battle over which none prevailed. The distant yet precise noises of mothers calling their children to lunch right after all the stores took a break and closed, regularly accompanied the rush of the farmers' carts, filled with hundreds of dark red tomatoes. In bars, men sat down to read the papers and to talk about sports, and often their angry yells penetrated the light walls of people's apartments.

My greatest pasttime was soccer. I remember spending hours and hours playing with my eight best friends. They were Luca, Nicola, Gianni, Marco, Filippo, Roberto, Alessio, and Beppe. We played next to Peppino's Furniture Store, not too distant from my own house. We continuously shouted, screamed, and laughed. Yes, we really did laugh a lot, because we didn't know what was truly going on.

The most embarrassing thing was asking the few girls we knew for used stockings, so that we could make our own soccer balls. We would fill the stockings with old newspapers, newspapers that always announced new German and Italian victories, newspapers that displayed

those long, horrifying lists of Italian men that didn't manage to avoid what was inevitable.

When the stockings were filled up and hard, we, actually Nicola, would shape them into a strange-looking ball with his thick, heavy hands.

I remember the first time we had to ask. Marco, the least shy, stood in front of the young, ugly girl, who we knew would never snob us. His simple face filled with red. The rest of us lined up behind him, trying to peep through his shaking legs. He was the tallest, and because of that, I doubt that the young girl, who was playing with her long and rugged ponytail, could have possibly recognized us. It was an accomplishment even if she had caught a glimpse of us.

When we did get the stockings, we ran all together to the usual spot to happily begin our game. As the air was filled with a new infantile excitement, we all felt our hearts beat strongly because the battle of battles was about to begin.

Filippo was by far the worst player, and of course, we always picked him last, sparing no meanness and displaying no tact whatsoever. He had short and dark curly hair, his skin was extremely tanned, and his legs were just a little too short. What was really peculiar about him was that he had extremely large ears, ears that almost flapped when there was a lot of wind. We always teased him because of this, yelling to him that he was so bad a player because his ears interfered

with his eyes. But he never said a thing back, and he would smile shyly, covering his ears with an innocent sense of shame.

He always kicked the ball accidentally on Peppino's store windows. The loud echoing sound caused the few clients inside to abruptly turn towards the nearby glass, displaying their acute disappointment at us kids and at Peppino himself. His clients were always old and rusty, and they wore spectacles that instead of aiding their vision, seemed to restrain it.

Peppino was a huge man probably weighing more than all of his furniture items put together. He was fat and had a fuzzy, thick beard that covered almost all of his face. He was so hairy that when he wore shorts, not even a tiny patch of his actual skin could be seen. I remember we used to call him "The Forest".

He rushed out with giant steps like an angry bear and we all ran away as if being chased by some possessed predator. The only one who never kept up with us was Filippo, his short legs betraying him each time. Peppino always yelled at the poor kid, ordering him to tell his friends never to set foot in front of his store again, never ever. Filippo would then run towards us, tears rolling all over his puffy cheeks. We, on the other hand, were laughing our brains off, finding all that had just happened overwhelmingly amusing.

Five minutes later, we would all be playing again, and guess where? Right in front of Peppino's Furniture Store. We were too involved in our game to realize the inherent danger in playing so close to such a brutal animal. Each of us pretended that we were playing on freshly mowed grass, in front of thousands of thrilled spectators, instead of accepting the fact that we were playing on hard gravel, occasionally softened here and there by patches of lighter sand. Sometimes one of us lied on the ground, immobile. Blood covered by light brown dust. Sometimes one of us did some lucky move, and everyone would laugh in astonishment. Sometimes one of us kicked the ball so far away that it rolled down the main street. Of course, he would have to sprint to go get it, followed by the most horrendous and striking insults that one could imagine. Our only faithful fan was Peppino's cat, looking through the store window with its usual laziness. But soccer was our only means to enter another world, a place far away from fear and tension.

When the air got a little cooler and the sky was enriched by different tints of orange and red, we would go home, for supper was probably ready. Our leather sandals were always dry and dusty, covered with every type of sand that was on the playing area. Our feet's color did not exactly match the color of the rest of our skin. Furthermore, we always stunk like dirty cows, and if we had been foreigners,

people could have detected us miles away. Our throats were dry, and the desire to quench that unbearable thirst took over our minds.

Sad that another day of brotherhood had died away, we all separated and went our own ways. Within a few minutes, the same spot that was the center of such widespread excitement was now an abandoned and desolate sight, just like all the other town streets. Silence. The only thing that accompanied this loneliness was the loud and penetrating sound of the protective railings the shopkeepers quickly rolled down in front of the windows. They were all tremendously impatient to go back home and see what their humble wives had prepared for them to eat.

Mamma always had her gentle and tender smile imprinted on her face when she opened the door for me, and I felt at home, really at home. She always reminded me of how much I smelled, but then would infallibly kneel down to my height and kiss my forehead, caressing my thick blond hair.

I was one of the few blond inhabitants, mainly because of my dad. Mamma used to tell me he was by far the most handsome man the town had seen in a long while, and she always told me that as the days passed I began to resemble him more and more.

The house was truly tiny, but it was very cozy and welcoming, all because of my mother's refined tastes in

colorful flowers. Every morning, Ernesto the florist passed by and dropped off a new bouquet of margaritas, still dripping with cold water. He was very kind and friendly, and he was very young. He always wanted to know if there was any news, and he always, always smiled so spontaneously when he told Mamma that margaritas brought good luck.

Once I was clean and had washed and my hair was neatly combed, Mamma waited for me at the dinner table. My hunger would always dominate my movements, and I began devouring whatever was on my plate, completely ignoring the fact that my mother was staring at my eyes, that were focused on my food.

When I finished eating and drinking, and was on the verge of vomiting, Mamma would begin to talk to me. She always asked me what I had done that day and how many I had scored, not that she was really interested in my goals. I always replied in short, abrupt answers that suffocated any details. But I never asked her anything, I was always the one that had to be questioned. I never asked her what she had done during the day. I never asked her. I was small, and I was too involved with my own world of illusions, giggles, dirt, and sand.

I remember us drinking that good red Barbera wine. It was blood red and I could hear its gentle sound as it poured out of the old bottle and filled the short glass underneath. I

always wanted some, always. I always took just a little too much. My head would soon spin heavily, but inside I felt so relaxed and at peace, as if something in me had been told to be quiet.

Then, she'd go outside on the small balcony with white tiles. She stood there and looked ahead on the walkway, watching the streetlights flicker monotonously. Then she would look into the far distance, into the pitch darkness, as if she were waiting for something. I remember I followed her and stood quietly next to her, beginning to play around with her skinny and fragile hands, those hands that were so important for me, until I reached the golden ring on the left hand. It was this ring that really interrupted my moment of tenderness, this golden ring that had no one representing its meaning and its worth.

This moment of union between my mother and I was the only event that continuously caused me to think about the two of us and not just myself. It was a moment filled with silence; she seemed to not want words in any of this. As for me, I never began a conversation with her.

There was always a cool breeze at this time of the evening, as if the colder currents took advantage of the opportunity to avenge the warm air when the sun was up. I remember her long, straight hair restlessly moving back and forth over her delicately pretty face. Her eyes were as green as the trees on the nearby Silan mountains, and they were

always shiny, too shiny, a tear forming slowly and then quickly dropping on the side of her cheek. She stared away and sighed heavily, biting her upper lip.

When I went to bed, I always passed Mamma's bedroom and every night, I stared at his picture sitting on Mamma's table. He had an innocent smile and a smooth face. Mamma said he was extremely gentle and loved to play with very young children. I just wished she had more of his pictures, so that at least each night I wouldn't experience the same strange feeling as if nothing was ever changing.

I remember that when I walked down on Via Nazionale to get bread for my mother, I would often meet my buddy Alessio. He was probably my best friend, mainly because he was completely nuts. He had a round head with almost no hair, since he cut it on a daily basis. He was tall and chubby, even though he possessed incredible strength. He had large, thick lips and a fat nose, and directly under his right eye he had a big, visible scar. He was heavy.

He once accidentally hit Carmelo LoRusso with a small rock. This Carmelo guy was the type of kid we were told to stay away from. He was the eldest of Francesco LoRusso's sons. His father was the leading Mafia character in the deep South. He was filthy rich and gave all his sons a pistol just in case anything "irritating" happened, he said. Whenever he came out of his luxurious carriage in the middle of the street, people would either run away or hide behind corners, their

legs trembling with fear. Mothers would pull their children inside their homes with abrupt jerks.

Carmelo always wore tight blue pants with a white silk shirt. His brown suede shoes matched his expensive belt, and his black, black hair contrasted his shirt. His hair was always wet and was always combed back elegantly, the last bit being held in a tight pony tail. The golden chain and watch were also useful in attracting all the town girls, who of course thought he was absolutely irresistible and fascinating. We all hated him with all our guts, but no one ever thought of confronting him. He was too powerful in every way.

One day, Alessio hit him with a small rock. Carmelo bent over to pick it up and then slowly headed straight over towards me, causing me to shrink back in resignation and horror, since I was so scared. However, my savior Alessio came out from our group and boldly challenged the young man for the sake of justice.

Carmelo obviously accepted, because he rapidly took his pistol from its holster and shot Alessio, who luckily managed to jump away from him. We all fled except for Filippo, the shitty soccer player, who sprinted to help the poor kid. The scar under his eye was caused by the bullet's heat as it passed right in front of him. Alessio knew he would never ever mess around with Carmelo LoRusso. From that day on, Alessio was my hero.

At the bakery, I would always get the same bread - not too cooked. While I told Riccardo (the baker with a boxer's nose, the ugliest nose I've ever seen) what I wanted, Alessio would always sneak some packs of bubble gum and cigarettes. When I saw him do that, he would first smile and then wink at me in his usual friendly way.

What I didn't understand was why the baker would seldom accept my money. He always said it didn't matter, and ordered me to say hi to Mamma for him. He told me to smile and to keep hoping.

I remember us sitting under the olive trees in the nearby countryside under the pale moonlight. All that could be seen were the tiny cigarette lights flickering around. All that could be heard were our giggles and whispers and the crickets singing loudly. It was really hot, and we were all bringing forth our quest for manhood. We were all sweating severely, as we could feel our armpits moistening. We all spoke of our dreams, dreams that could never come true. But of course, we didn't know that yet. Roberto and Beppe wanted to go fight in the war as soon as they were old enough. Their fathers had cheated their way out of the draft, pretending to have a cancer. Nicola wanted to be a pilot, because he felt he could leave the place whenever he wanted to. Luca wanted to have women all the time. All he wanted was women, and that

was all he talked about. Filippo wanted to play soccer, but I was sure he was going to change his mind after all the "polite encouragement" we gave him. Marco never knew what he wanted to be because by the time we started talking about this, he fell asleep. Gianni wanted to go live in Rome, where there were more people. All Alessio wanted to do was to look for that Mafioso bastard and kick his arrogant ass. Me, I just wanted to be with my mother, all I had.

I remember those boring and meaningless wedding processions, where all of the town had to bring the two families' presents. My friends and I had to wait for hours outside their houses, waiting for our relatives to come out after their eternal talks and wishes of a splendid marriage. There were long lunches and dinners, with food everywhere and wine poured into each glass in abundance. The young girls wore pretty white dresses and shiny black shoes, while the bride wore a long white veil that partially hid her face. Everyone smiled and laughed, and the most popular folk songs were sung for hours and hours. Clapping could be heard at times, and all types of cheers embarrassed the married couple. The smaller boys played under the tables, their mothers uselessly attempting to halt their energy.

I also remembered the funerals, the town dressing in black as a sign of respect, the procession following the

funerary carriage. All I knew was that all those people weeping made me cry, too. Hundreds of flowers of every sort were tossed on the coffin, until it was almost completely covered. The priest leading the procession went without ever stopping, but with his eyes closing every once in a while. People that were sitting down on their balconies stood up and began whispering short sentences. The shopkeepers came out of their places, and made the sign of the cross as the procession passed. There was Peppino, silent and sad. There was the baker, his face serious as ever. There was the newspaper boy, and there was the barber, their faces paralyzed. The church bells were ringing loudly, echoing throughout the whole town. Then there was the cemetery, the grand finale. The place where all the tears of desperation poured down faster than ever, the place where the final good-bye took place, the place where the priest concluded his rituals, the place where soft moans now grew loud and disturbing, the place where even the smaller kids stopped playing. I just didn't know what was going on.

I remember when some young soldier could be seen with his backpack, walking home on the main street, greeted by the cries and laughter of joy of his family and friends. His relatives would dash onto the road and kiss the soldier several million times. For them, those days must have been extremely nice. Then, to celebrate, the

lucky family would hold celebrations for everyone until late night, dinners with veal and cheese, prosciutto and wine. Usually this all took place next to St. Lorenzo's Church, in the open square. The soldier's face was filled with incredulity and a happiness that was so genuine and beautiful. The parents' faces the same, as if they had found their lost diamond in a desert. The young men's smiles were what made me smile but also what made me feel jealous, and I think I knew why.

Mamma often told me that one day, I would meet him, but I did not believe this. Everyone else was coming back except for him. Mamma told me to never stop waiting, because the day I did, she would never caress me again, she said. I had that picture in my mind, and I could never change it. It was always the same picture, always the same expression. But I could not stand it any longer, I wanted a new one. I was beginning to get the impression that waiting was useless, and that there was nothing to hope for, but Mamma insisted I should keep hoping and praying. I always could picture her on that white balcony, with her worried face staring into the emptiness. I began to think that maybe she and I would have to stand on that balcony all our lives, waiting for something that might have never come.

Paolo Bilotta

Owl

It started, not surprisingly, over a plate of oysters Mosca, an oyster pie of olive oil drenched stuffing, baked in a cast iron pan and turned over twice. Mosca's is an old style restaurant in Tangapahoah parish, a backward region where cows grow with the proliferation of mushrooms and even the earth heaves a slow breath. That early spring, like any other, had a mist which rose out of the surrounding swamp with the regularity of the tide. It often forced travelers to wait until two or three in the morning, when the moon came up, to make their way back to the city. The only way there is over the Huey P. Long bridge, which, though steel, is rickety and sways gently when the wind blows. Regardless, tonight, it is full of traffic, mostly making its way to the Avondale shipbuilding plant and the rails that backbone the bridge bristle with locomotives and hull parts. After the bridge, it's a good ten miles along the levee and then off on dirt capillaries past cow fields and wooden bridges over bayou St. John inlets.

Mosca's was once a gas station with a truckstop restaurant, but when the oil crunch bared its fangs, Frank D'Abite sold to Antonio Valence, a "family man" who did away with the gas pumps. The edge of the parking lot, made of bone white oyster shells dredged off the Mississippi's flank, holds an old Orco sign which

stagnates in a puddle of rust water. The shells cackle and crackle when the customers drive up in Saab 900 cd turbos and Cadillac Sevilles. The building is white and made of wood patched over so many times it appears scaly. No reservations are taken and even though a family might spend a hundred dollars in an evening, only cash is accepted. Tina, the head waitress, won't let you in unless you have been there before. Any one new must wait at least three hours at the bar before being seated. The restaurant is really only three rooms-- a room for the bar, plastic, with a steel rim and stools that spin spasmodically with a touch, the kitchen, and the dining room.

We were there in that dining room which had always impressed upon me the feeling of abundance. The tables are big, designed that way to hold portions which feed half a dozen. Often an entire extended family will go, thirty people down to second cousin, and squeeze around two tables, everyone armed with eleven inch plates which bristle with battlements of food.

We were there in that dining room because my father wanted me to take part in Mardi Gras. He had been born in Columbus, Ohio and moved to New Orleans while in his mid twenties, a fact which barred him from entrance into any of the Mardi Gras Krewes. I was born in New Orleans, so I could take part in one of those social clubs, provided someone allowed me to start the process.

We were eating with Mr. Valence that night. He was an old man at this point, a little rotund around the belly, but his face appeared almost insect-like in its gauntness. His eyes were milky with cataracts; he couldn't see past our table, and he never lost an opportunity to advertise for himself.

"Boy," he said to me, "When you get a little older, you should come visit my ladies at the Old Plantation restaurant. With a smile like you've got on you, they'd positively eat you up alive." He gave me a friendly shove on the shoulder with his fist and laughed. He didn't have an Italian accent; like most upper class New Orleanians, he had a midwestern, almost Chicaguan, speech.

My mother had been silent all evening and had been twiddling with her oysters. She never really ate very much, due to a constricted esophagus. This evening, she'd had an attack of the sighs--that's all that would travel in her mouth. She didn't like oysters or the way they smack on the teeth. My father was beaming and tapping his Stein Mart wing tips gently on the floor.

"You know," said the insect, "You're a lucky little fellah, that your father cares so much about you. Why, I know a dozen families been here longer than you and want into Proteus or Comus. You can buy your way into Bacchus or Endymion, but to get into the real clubs, you have to earn your way in. You have to follow the proper

channels. I've arranged for you to go to the Squires ball. You have fun there and make some friends and you'll go next year too. First, all of the maids will be presented, followed by the king and queen's promenade. Shortly after, the music will start and everyone will find their dates and dance for a few hours. Finally there is a supper for which you must stay if you want to keep your membership for next year. Long as you stay in the city and don't go to any Yankee boarding school or college and you'll be put in the lottery for membership in the Krewes."

After the oysters came the creme brule, the aperitif, and the espresso. The insect continued to ramble on about opportunity. He was a good salesman. My father's Steinmart shoes kept tapping with the regularity of a stop watch. Soon we were speeding down unlit roads and paying the toll for the Huey P. Long.

"You'd better be careful when you go to this ball. Don't leave early and don't drink too much. I want you to pay attention. It's something I've always wanted to do, so you'd better give me the details. I want to know what your costume is and I want you to tip the valet. I want you to tell me the first song they play and the last song. I want you to tell me who's king and queen this year. I know that they're selected at birth and I hate not knowing until I pick up the morning after's Time Picayune."

My father seemed more worried about my being measured for the costume than my ability to obtain a date. He woke me up at seven for my ten o'clock appointment and had my mother fix a four egg omelette with shitaki and bluehoney swamp mushrooms. He shaved off his mustache for the occasion and was very neat with his napkin and careful to fold it along the creases in his lap. He put in his contacts and was wearing his best suit from Steinmart's. His shoes gleamed. We left as soon as he cleaned the face of his Rolex.

As we passed Rick's Pancake cottage on Carrollton avenue, he said, "I wish they hadn't given you such an early appointment. But I guess they're all strange hours so the location's kept a secret. You picked out a date yet?"

"Yeah,"

The tailor was in a small apartment next to a Winn-Dixie grocery store. It was on the second floor, directly above an ophthalmologist. Though we were early, we were the first appointment, so there was no wait.

The tailor was Hispanic and very short. His hair was receding so that only a triangle showed on his eye-level forehead. Vodka wafted off his tongue.

"You must stand very still. The costumes are very expensive. You must be measured exactly, especially for the inseam."

Other than that there was no talking and all I could hear

was the couing of the pigeons shitting in the cornices. I saw a black couple standing in one of the alleys from the window. The woman looked up as if she was resting her chin on her arm. The man stared directly at me. He had a rose in one hand and her arm in the other. He grimaced like he was pushing the thorns into his palm. His jacket, with its fur frills might have been a woman's and his watch was snaky loose.

They were just standing there in that alley full of tires and wildflowers. There was a fence misty in the distance. And the z's of the fire escapes drooped enough to creak. I could see right into the backs of the apartments. The broken cement piled up like markers for a grave.

Afterwards, my father could talk of nothing else than the beauty of costumes that require such care in fitting. "They must be silk, or cashmere. Often they have plumes in the hats and long flowing capes. The mask is the most important. You'll probably get a white mask because of your dark complexion, but from what I've been told, they're fitted not only by color and size but also by the shape of the face; the prominence of the eyes. You do know that you won't be able to your glasses, so you'll have to play it a little blind, but you'll still see enough. Besides, you can just ask your date for all the details you miss. She'll be sitting in the stands around the floor so she'll get the best view. Don't forget to find out who's

king when they make the procession around you.”

The day before the ball, I asked Virginia Tomber in French class, but she just chewed on her white eraser. Antonia Magill twirled her toes three times in her sandals when I talked to her but she said she was going with Andrew Hush. I asked Nicole D’Arrete over Camel lights and a Whopper at the Burger Kings on Leon C. Simon. She pursed her lips, took another drag, and told me she was going with John Ver. Stefanie Sturges didn’t return my phone calls. Neither did Julia Benet.

I took the bus home the long way for eighty-five cents. I took the aisle because an old black woman with a fishnet in her hair snatched the last seat. The sky had been darkening all day and as I boarded the bus, it broke into a downpour that sounded like a colosseum’s crowd. We made our way past gardens of granite and thickets of marble columns. The gutters pulsed with arteries of lead and Quarter courtyards clothed in mildew heaved a slow breath. Rain plummeted out of the sky, seeped out of grills and the streets went silvery. Droplets congealed on Corinthian carvings, coalesced into rillets, traveled furrows and tendrilled to the mirrory sidewalk.

My father was wearing a white polo shirt, jeans and a belt when I got back at six o clock. “Why aren’t you dressed up?” I asked.

"I thought I'd let you have the car for tonight."

"I don't really need it...you can just drop me off."

"What about your date? You do have one don't you?"

"Well..."

"You didn't even try. You little shit. Anyone would have gone with you. Especially that Lillac girl."

"We haven't met since we were children."

"I can't believe this what with all that money..."

"You didn't let me finish. I'm going with Nicole D'Arrete. I didn't think you'd want me to go with her."

"You don't have to lie too. You may as well bring her back here afterwards. I'd like to meet her." My father's jaws rippled and he closed his eyes. "You need to get ready quickly if you're going to pick up your date on time."

The ball was always held at the Jerusalem Temple, a one-time synagogue converted into an activity center. Though I had never before been inside the Jerusalem temple, my friends who had gone the previous year had given me some idea of what to expect. The ballroom is in the center of the first floor and is surrounded by hallways, most of which lead to the basement which my friends likened to a subway station.

Pumice-scrubbed, with Academy shoes on my feet, I stepped into the bejeweled door of the Jerusalem Temple.

The sky was bound with clouds and the grains of sand in the pavement glistened with lamplight. Cydney, a black man with tails, a mustache, and a top hat met me at the door, snapped twice and bid me follow him. He led me through rillets of people, past black leather chairs with cashmere cushions, through a door and down concrete steps where pipes proliferated with snake-like abandon to the Krewe's dressing room.

The dressing room had concrete walls and floors with yellowish stains in the corners and on the floor near the stairwell. The near end of the room was stuffed with wheeled racks of blue, orange, yellow and black tasseled costumes. The far end had garden stone benches with drunks laid out on them like Romans on their litters. The room was lit by the braziers that the flambeaux would carry to light the parades. They had the names of the Krewes on them, Comus, Pegasus, Rex, Hermes and Nereus. Cydney asked my name, pointed to a pack of clothes and left, quick as a maitre' d'.

My costume was a bright orange shirt that was in the pullover style and had a ruffle on the collar. The black pants shimmered with polyester and were drawn with a string around the waist. Attached to the shirt at the shoulders was a blue and white striped cape that went down past my waist. Faint stains from previous wearers clustered near the armpits. I was relieved once I saw John Ver's costume; as

he was short, his costume was an animal-- an Athenian Owl, and his saucer eyes bulged big as the moon. "Did you come stag too?" He asked.

We both wore glasses which wouldn't fit under our masks and so, we went to look for our favor bags--a bunch of bags full of silver trinkets, all drawn with a string. The trinkets (that year in the shape of an owl) had to be given to our dance partners later in the evening.

I saw my friend Andrew Hush, whose father was an ambassador. He was taking shots from a Jim Bean flask. Ashes from his Picayune cigarettes smeared his orange and green kilt and the corner of his cape. Though it was his first ball, he was captain. The white-frilled cummerbund on his tuxedo gleamed. John muttered something about depending too much on parents' stature. We asked Hush where the bags were given out that year and Hush whispered how ironic it was that the ball was held in a Temple.

Hush led us over to the line for favor bags where an old black woman was handing them out. Everyone there was reeling. They rolled on the wooden heels of their academy shoes and every so often, one of them would step on another's foot, yelling, "Watch out, Eddie," or "Watch out, Ron."

It was a long wait; and as soon as I got my bag, it was time to line up and go out onto the floor. I dropped my

glasses into the favor bag, tied the drawstring about my wrist (as Hush told me). Without my glasses, I felt the air was swirling with heat. Distracted as I was, I almost fell over when a push came from behind—and then—(Hush whispered in my ear) everyone pushes towards and against the door so that when it opens, they burst out onto the dance floor. Hands jabbed into the small of my back and on my side, under the ribs and molded along the contour of the spine. My nose pressed into the nape of someone's neck and their hair slithered through the slits in my mask to my eyes.

There was a whistle and the door broke open; we all seeped out over the floor. The stink of Jim Beam and Jack Daniels rose as a zephyr. There was an applause, a downpour crowd, but without my glasses, I could only see the backs of the Krewe members in front of me. Before the group split in half at the Captain's command, which was only the first of orders upon orders with orders, I felt everyone was walking with arms akimbo I had been elbowed so many times. I could not see the commands (Hush told me they were hand signals.) The crowd pushed from one side of the room to the other with the dependability of the tides, sat down, made camp, stood, clapped cat-calls; watched the maids go around the room. In my daze, the room was awash with water colors and Linseed oil.

The crowd drizzled down as the king and queen

promenaded around the room. In my vision, the king's hair quivered with dancing flame and the queen was a brilliant white. Hush retorted with a volatile belch. We were all pressed close so that the rubbing of our costumes made a faint buzzing of bees and the sweat stang through my skin. I was thankful they announced the King and Queen's names.

A big brass band started up playing, "We're dreaming of a *white* Christmas...." The crowd clambered down off its benches, appearing in my eyes as insubstantial as ghosts. Their tulle trimmed dresses and jewel constellations were frost breath.

Since none of the women knew what their dates were dressed as, I felt I could find a partner but I was confronted with nothing less than a legion of incessant dancers with strategies and calvaries. I was slammed between two couples then tripped by a third, and finally trampled by a fourth.

When Andrew Hush bumped Nicole D'Arrete her blue eyes rolled like an ocean. She was wearing a white full length dress heavily frilled around the hips. She gave Andrew her hand and they began to dance. Andrew, however, had taken too much to drink, and he stepped on her feet constantly and flung around as if a marionette jerked wildly around by the strings. Eventually, he tripped on a neighbor and fell on another couple that

crumpled under his weight. Nicole shrugged and fled into the crowd muttering "excuse me" as she bumped into a couple. My face flushed and I felt I was developing a fever. My forehead ached from my eyes' squint.

John Ver asked me why I was leaving and I told him that I could take the ball only if I could see it.

I made my way for the door where I put my glasses on to look back into the ballroom. The dancers were slow, and despite the Jim Bean and Fris moved in a regular waltz, steady and pulsing as an artery. The dance was presided over by a man dressed as a medieval king with a glistening crown of tin foil and potato chip crumbs on his mouth. He was staring out the window while lightening the storm speared all around us and hid the moon from view.

As I made my way past the pipes on the stairwell, my eyes began to itch and my throat coiled with the strength of a constrictor. I felt as if the earth had suddenly gone transparent and I could see the swirling magma beneath. When I reached the rusty back exit doors, I ate the air outside as if I had just come out of a dive.

"The dressing room was clothed in rose marble and black valets dressed in white tie helped us into our costumes. My shirt was cashmere and off white, with ivory buttons attached to gold shafts. My pants were black satin and tied with a red cummerbund. My mask was a second skin.

"After we were assembled into the dance hall, the maids were introduced under the squeals of the other women, gathered in oak carved bleachers around us in a semi circle. All eyes were focused on the king who held his golden scepter high with divine right. The Queen sat silently by him, her dress so soft it must have been made of petals. She rolled softly on her bejeweled slippers.

"Soon the music started and the women fluttered down to the floor as if winged. I met my date quickly and we began to dance. She was brimming with joy and her eyes were like the sea. The floor was without substance, so graceful was our dancing.

"The supper was a feast of lamb and duck. There was even a whole roasted pig on a spit. We ate calmly and gracefully. We fed off of each other's forks. After signing up for next year's ball, I took her home."

After I talked to my father, I went up the stairs to the bathroom and took off my glasses to wash my face. I could feel the water splashed against me devouring all of the dirt and it fell away, discolored and noxious. Looking up into the mirror I saw a face frustrated by its own ignorance and alive with my father's features. The English hump in the nose is his as are the dimple in the chin and the long straight hair, but no part of me more resembles him than my eyes which are dark and always dilated as if sensitive to the light.

Brett York

The Performance

Black nylons. Margot stared at the black nylons that lay alongside the silk black and white polka dot dress on the pale pink sofa in the corner of her room. Black patent leather flats with half inch heels were sitting waiting for her on the creme plush rug next to the sofa. This was tonight's outfit for the Ryan's Christmas party. Her mother had slipped into her room and laid it out for her while she was in the bath. Of course, Margot never saw or heard her mother when she came to prepare Margot's clothing. The last time Mrs. McGail had come into Margot's room when Margot was there was when Margot had the chicken pox at age 7. Now thirteen years old, Margot hated the black nylons and ultra-sophisticated outfits that her mom dressed her up in like a doll.

Margot stepped into the sleeveless silk dress and zipped it as far as her hands could reach up her back. She pulled the belt made of the matching silk fabric around her slim waist and fastened it. She slipped on the itchy stockings and stepped into the tight heels. Margot closed her door behind her and walked across the oriental rug that ran the length of the upstairs hallway. After passing the four closed guest bedroom doors she knocked on the one at the end of the hallway.

"Mother," Margot called. "I'm ready."

Margot stared up at the woman in the doorway. A tight, black dress clung to and barely covered Alexandra McGail's voluptuous figure. The dress's off the shoulder neckline accentuated Mrs. McGail's brown shoulders and collarbone. The fabric's sharp dip in her chest made her cleavage visible. Her arms were muscular and brown. Mrs. McGail spent 2 hours a day at aerobics, one hour lifting weights in the gym she had created in their basement, and 5 hours a week at the tanning salon. Her dress tapered in at her 22 inch waist and then flared out - ending about three and a half inches above her knees. Jet black opaque stockings highlighted her thin but shapely legs. Suede heels added one and a half inches to her usual 5'7" height. She hovered like a vulture over Margot.

"Turn around," she said after thoroughly examining Margot's front. Her long nails scratched Margot's back as her fingers zipped Margot's dress all the way up. Then she ran her fingers through Margot's thick red hair.

"Come in," She said, roughly taking Margot's hand and bringing her into her dressing room. "I guess we'll just have to braid this mess. Sit."

Sitting on the stool of her mother's dressing table Margot looked into the gold-framed mirror in front of her. Her mother's silky blond hair was swept into a French twist. Clear skin without a wrinkle; eyes deep and blue.

Her lips were pressed into a tight line that marked her frustration as her fingers twisted Margot's frizzy hair. Margot's gaze shifted to her own reflection. Skin pale and freckly; dull red hair that was coarse and unruly.

Margot remembered the day that she had come home from school crying after her friends had teased her for being adopted. She didn't look anything like her beautiful mother, they had taunted, so she had to be adopted.

"Margot, I realize that we don't look anything alike," Her mother had explained to her. "Unfortunately you look exactly like your father. Every time I look at you I see him, and your face will always remind me of him." Margot's father had disappeared from their beautiful home when Margot was two years old. She had no memories of him. Mrs. McGail had never once tried to locate or talk to him; having inherited a quarter of her father's large fortune, she didn't need her husband's money to support her. Margot never asked her mother about him. But then, she didn't really ask her mother about anything.

One final yank and Mrs. McGail tied a silk black bow around the end of Margot's braid. She put her hands on Margot's hips and lifted her up. Her eyes narrowed and she looked up and down Margot one last time. "Good," she said, "Now go and wait for me in the car." Like a robot operating on mechanical instructions, Margot walked through the dark oak paneled hallways of her house and into

the massive living room (her mom insisted that it be called the "ballroom"). The sound of her heels on the rosewood floor echoed as she walked toward the lighted Christmas tree at the end of the room.

Large boxes and presents overflowed from the tree's professionally decorated boughs. Margot knew what Christmas would be like tomorrow. Her mother would come downstairs at around twelve, complaining about her hangover. Margot would open her presents: expensive clothing, jewelry, or classical music - items that Mrs. McGail referred to as "tools for self improvement." Margot fantasized that maybe this year she would receive something like a softball mitt or a rock tape. No, her mom didn't even know who REM was, nor would she ever acknowledge the fact that her fragile daughter liked sports. Then there would be returning to school after vacation and listening to all her classmates show off their cute colorful Christmas sweaters and exchange the new tapes their parents and siblings had given them. They would look suspiciously at Margot when she returned to school dressed in cashmere sweaters instead of sweatshirts, wool pants instead of jeans, and pearls instead of beaded rainbow friendship necklaces. She didn't have any friendship necklaces.

Margot kicked the present marked, "To Margaret, from mother." It wasn't fair. She walked out of the ballroom and waited in the back seat of her mother's black Mercedes.

Margot never sat in the front seat.

Mrs. McGail entered the car and the McGail family drove in silence to the party. Alexandra McGail didn't like to speak before a party. Margot was sure that she needed the quiet time to rehearse her lines once more before her big performance. A handsome valet parked the Mercedes and Margot followed her mom up the Ryan's brick front walk. It was Christmas Eve and they were both wearing black. Just before opening the door, Alexandra turned to Margot and pinched her cheeks. "Ouch," Margot responded.

"Oh, please. This improves the circulation and gives you a rosy glow. Now, remember," she said, straightening Margot's dress for the fifth time. "Smile a lot and mingle. I better not catch you in some room watching television with those bratty Ryan kids. They're loud and they always look messy and have runny noses. Just stay near me and try to imitate some of the things I do. And don't eat too much - a real lady always exercises restraint." She pinched her own cheeks and threw her shoulders back. "We are both happy and beautiful. Now let's go." She grabbed Margot's arm right above her elbow and led her into the Ryan's mansion.

Margot wondered how her father was spending Christmas Eve.

Smoke and elegantly dressed people filled the Ryan's living room. Loud piano music and clanking champagne and wine glasses required the partygoers (or the cast of

actors and actresses) to yell at each other. But it didn't matter if they heard each other or not; they were all sharing the same script.

"Alexandra!" A large man embraced her mother and kissed her on the cheek, very closely to the mouth. "You look absolutely stunning, as usual," he said, his gaze traveling up and down her toned and exposed body. His hands squeezed her tight biceps. His belly protruded out over his alligator belt and Margot could smell the alcohol on his breath from where she was standing two feet away. She moved away one step further.

"And who is *this*?" Mr. Ryan questioned condescendingly. He arched his eyebrows and pointed at Margot. Then his eyes moved back to Mrs. McGail. His drunken expression was similar to that of a dog staring at a piece of meat dangling just out of reach. Every year he forgot Margot's name and every year it was the same look. Margot felt nauseous.

"Why do you let him look at you this way?" Margot thought, "How can you let yourself do this?" But Margot knew she shouldn't care. She had the right to hate her mother.

"This is my sweet Margaret, isn't she turning into a sophisticated young lady?" Mrs. McGail put her long thin arm around Margot's white shoulders.

"My sweet *Margaret*?" Margot thought to herself. She

hated the name Margaret. Margot turned to glance at her mother, but before she had the chance to make eye contact she felt the sting of fingernails digging into her shoulder. Margot looked around the room for other children but saw none. Then again, what would she do if she saw any? She didn't know how to talk to them, she didn't know how to talk to anyone. Trapped - trapped by her mother's sharp fingernails, Mr. Ryan's drunk fat body, by her tight black nylons. She hated the name Margaret.

"Mother, I'm going to go get a soda, okay?"

"Sure, honey," she smoothed her hand along the top of Margot's head. "I love you, dear." Margot skin crept with goose bumps at her mother's touch. Mrs. McGail never touched Margot unless they were around other people who were higher on the social ladder than she was. Margot pushed through the crowd in a daze, stopping to nod and smile at the people her mother had instructed her to. She got her soda and continued to mingle.

"Hello, Mrs. Baker... Yes, I know your daughter Samantha. We dance together," Margot knew that even she was speaking rehearsed lines. "Yes, she is a beautiful dancer....Hello, Mr. Clark...We're going to go to Paris for the remainder of the vacation...Uh huh.. Yes, I am lucky, she is the greatest mother."

The room was packed and it took Margot fifteen minutes to move from one side of it to the other. Bartenders and

cocktail waitresses hurried past her, and soon the number of dirty glasses covered the entire bar counter. Margot turned to look for her mother and bumped into a tall dark-haired woman in a red dress. "Watch it," the woman hissed, "you almost made me spill my drink. Why don't you go find your parents?" The woman turned her back to Margot and began conversing with a blonde suntanned man who wore spectacles and a purple paisley bow tie.

"Yes, Melanie is doing wonderfully at St. Paul's." the dark-haired woman announced, "Oh, she is on the honor roll and she has such a gorgeous boyfriend....Um, hmm, soccer season is going well...we have no doubts that she'll be the captain next year..."

Empty glasses now covered the almost all of the table tops. The crowd had thinned out but the volume level of the room remained the same. Exhausted, Margot finally pushed her way to the corner of the room and sat down on a brown leather loveseat. The clock above her read 11 o'clock. What was her father doing right now? Did he think of the two of them?

Directly across the room stood her mother, leaning precariously on Mr. Ryan. In her left hand Mrs. McGail held a glass of red wine; her right hand rested on Mr. Ryan's shoulder. Her eyes were glazed and Margot knew she was drunk. The words echoed in Margot's ear: "A real lady always exercises restraint."

Mr. Ryan leaned over to pick up a glass and his sudden movement threw Mrs. McGail off balance. She began to fall to the right, but stopped herself by grasping onto the ledge of the mahogany side table next to her. A red wine stain marred the front of her dress. She looked down at the stain and bit her lip. Her face was tight and contorted. She wore the humiliated expression of an actress who has temporarily fallen out of character in the middle of a performance.

Margot stood up so she could see her mother's face better. "Yes!" Margot thought. "Finally she will get what she deserves - finally she feel embarrassed the way I do." But when she caught her mother's eyes Margot swallowed hard, trying to push down the golf-ball sized lump that was creeping up her throat. She rubbed her eyes. "Don't cry, don't cry. This is what you always wanted." she thought. But suddenly, she didn't want it anymore.

Margot pushed through the crowd, not stopping to talking to anyone this time. She reached her mother and touched her hand. "Would you like to go now, mother?" Margot asked.

"Yes, Less go now, baby," Mrs. McGail slurred. "Thank you Jon," she said to Mr. Ryan, "It was, as always, a gala and eggsquisite affair." The actress was back and right on cue. Mr. Ryan kissed her hand and she turned to leave.

"*You* are exquisite, Alexandra. Have a marvelous Christmas " he said.

Mrs. McGail sighed as she closed the door behind her.

Her performance was over and there would be another show tomorrow night. Over and over her mother would read the same script hoping to win the approval of the same audience. It was what she did - her job. "Don't slouch, Margot," she said. "I caught you slouching three times in there. You can't get away with that, you know. People notice everything- any little slip." Margot didn't clench her fists to control and hide her anger the way she usually did after one of her mother's comments. It was all different now.

They were silent until they reached home. "I'll see you downstairs in the dining room at twelve tomorrow for brunch." Mrs. McGail said to Margot as they took off their coats in the front hall. "Don't come late, it's rude."

"I won't. Goodnight." She watched her mother ascend the stairway with the grace of a ballet dancer. "Merry Christmas, Mom" Margot said to her mother's back.

Mrs. McGail stopped, and turned to see Margot standing at the bottom of the stairs. She looked at her daughter for about a minute.

"Actually, she said, ".....make brunch twelve-thirty." She turned and walked up the dark stairway into her empty master bed room.

Leila Jones

Gun

I was intimidated. I was always intimidated when it came to resisting my friends. They used me. Their fathers owned the small shops that lined the wide streets of Summerset, Wisconsin. My father worked at a bank in the city. I felt like an outsider. My family never went to town festivals or social events like the Pepperfest, where everyone sits around and eats really hot peppers and then washes them down with lots and lots of beer. But I know that it all really comes down to money. I got it, they wanted it.

"Josh, I saw a cool advertisement in the St. Croix paper today."

"What's that, Zack?"

"A gun. A Winchester shotgun, some guy is selling it for two hundred bucks. Do you want to buy it? It'll be tons of fun, man."

This was exactly the kind of situation that I tried to avoid. Zack was really asking me to buy the shotgun for him. I give him a ride home from school every day and now he wants me to buy a gun. What was I going to do with a shotgun? My father violently opposed guns. Toy guns weren't even allowed in my house. My father believed that if I played with guns I would become a violent person. The other kids didn't understand; thought I was a pussy. Or now that I look back, maybe I just thought they thought I was a pussy. Who could

tell when they were sixteen? God, I couldn't.

Dinner that night was cold as ever. My father got home, slightly late as usual, bitching about the bank and how some fuck had just blown the deal of his life. It was never as bad as my father made it out to be though. He was the eternal pessimist. I don't even think my mother even listened to him at dinner anymore. She always asked the same questions, and then just smiled at the answers. How could my father stand it? I always listened to him, but he wasn't talking to me. There was little real conversation. Our meal was drowned in a kind of silence.

"Hey Josh, I called that guy from the paper. He said we could come by tomorrow and pick up the gun. Are you going to put up the money?"

I hadn't thought about the gun since that afternoon when Zack mentioned it on the way home from school. I didn't need to, I knew I didn't want the gun. I was irritated that he had called.

"Yeah, I'll put up the money." I hung up, pissed off.

One thing my father was generous with was his money. My bank account always had money in it. Dad made sure of that. As I headed to First National, the small one branch bank that my dad made fun of, and also where my account was, I thought about what Zack and I were going to do with a shotgun. This was when I got scared. Zack would be in control of the gun and he was wild.

School was tedious. I couldn't concentrate; the gun consumed my thoughts. In a way, I was getting excited. I mean really, what was I going to do with a gun? I didn't see Zack all day but he was waiting for me by the car after the last bell.

We drove out of town on Highway V towards Elk River. The highway turned into farm land very quickly in these parts. Before we knew it, we were there. A grey shack that leaned badly to the left greeted us. White trash, I thought. Two big dogs were chained to two big dog houses in the yard. They both started barking and sprinting towards us, only to have their chains take them airborne when the slack ran out. Junk filled the yard. Cars, metal chairs, and engine blocks were everywhere.

"Zack, let's get out of here, this place sucks."

"Shut up. We came all the way out here and we are going to get a shotgun."

I started to back up the car, a bold move if I remember, when I saw him. He looked just as I had pictured the owner of this shithole would. He looked like hell. He had a beard and he had a limp. His clothes were torn and dirty. I stopped the car and got out.

"You boys here for the gun?" he asked.

"Yes," I think I said.

"Three hundred bucks," he said.

I told him he was full of shit and started walking back

to the car. He said two hundred was fine. I hate guys like that, always trying to screw you over. We got the gun and headed back. Zack was admiring the gun on the way home.

"Hey big guy, watch this," he demanded. Then he leaned out the window and pulled the trigger, completely destroying a mailbox.

"Home run," he said.

I can't remember the last time I laughed that hard. I laughed so hard it hurt. I had to stop the car. Zack nailed a few more mail boxes before it was my turn. I couldn't believe I was having so much fun. I just couldn't stop laughing. Imagine those people coming out of their houses and finding that their mailbox was destroyed. What if it happened at my house? It would probably cause my father to lose the deal of his life. Zack won that game five to three. Of course, it ended a little early. We got caught.

Zack and I sat in the small police station beneath City Hall and waited for our dads. But somehow, I wasn't scared, I didn't care what happened. Actually, I don't think Zack cared either. That day I was happy, and no one was going to change that fact.

Chris Murphy

Eric's Originals

White knuckles gripped the sweaty reins. Pedaling hard, fast, faster. The couple on the other side of the street was still winning by a nose but the finish line was not yet visible and though his body trembled, begging forgiveness, he urged the blue horse to move up a gear. Only when the two men who had been strolling hand and hand turned off into the darkness and his victory was guaranteed did he relax to enjoy enduring the ache in his legs, the tension in his thighs, the burning sensation that was spreading down his throat and into his lungs, and the pounding that echoed resoundingly through his head. As he rode along, he contemplated the business card he would order when he became successful. "Eric's Originals" printed in bold black print centered with a phone number, his own line, in the bottom right corner. He could hear the band even though he was still two blocks away. They were bloody awful and he contemplated riding on past the outdoor cafe. He loved these long hard gallops, he loved the physical pain that drove out anything else that had invaded his body. He only wished his sight wasn't so blurry so he could see the stars above. There were no stars tonight. It was cloudy, threatening to drizzle as usual.

He halted and abandoned his second-hand horse outside the cafe. The patio was half empty with scattered fans listening to the sad band attempt to find a tune. Stopping at the

entrance to pay his two dollars, he paused to chat and gesticulate to the doorman while watching two girls, who sat in the corner furthest from the band, out of the corner of one blurred eye. It seemed to him that there were four girls but experience taught him to chop off half the picture, leaving only two. The taller of the two had long black hair parted in the middle. She had a tight black tank top tucked into fitted jeans. She caught and returned his stare, running her eyes over his body in a cursory glance, watching the corners of his mouth turn up and run into his cheekbones. He held her eyes with his for a few seconds before shifting his gaze to her friend. Blonde hair pulled back loosely in a black ribbon, she was dressed more casually in an oversized white button down shirt hanging over khaki pants with a tear in one knee. He watched her ringless fingers drum the table unconsciously. Searching his pockets for a cigarette, he remembered he had flushed them all down the jon this morning after promising to quit. Another scan over the patio and he made his way over to their table, stepping carefully over the cracks without looking down for fear he would fall.

“Can I bum a butt off you?” he asked the tall one. She smiled invitingly and offered him a chair and a Camel Light. He could have predicted she smoked Camels and thought longingly of his Marlboros at the bottom of the jon. It saddened him to think they were probably all covered with shit by now. Her hands were deep brown, fine-boned with long

fingers, delicate like match sticks with red tips. When she lit the lighter for him, he thought her fingers were on fire and drew back. She laughed shrilly and he looked to her friend for a reality check, for comfort. The blonde-haired girl offered none. He wished she'd stop drumming the table. He longed to trace her unpolished hands, feel where the nails had been chewed to blood. "I should have written a children's book," he thought. "All writers ought to write at least one children's book." He didn't accept that he ought to do anything for her, but he would have done it. It's sad that children recognize loss. Her eyes were dark, blue or black but his were too out of focus to tell for sure.

"My mother had a baby." He told them both. "Congratulations! Is it a boy or a girl?" asked the tall one. He couldn't remember. His mother's breasts had grown so large. She would press his head against her swollen stomach, stroking his hair. Inside she sounded like the fish-tank at school. He imagined the baby as one of the fish. A beautiful golden fish he would name Tico. Tico tapped Morse code from inside his mother. The goldfish tapped their noses against the glass of the tank as if trying to find a place to hide in the plastic background.

He took a long drag from the tasteless cigarette and blew perfect smoke rings. The tall girl was telling him that the guitarist was an old friend from grade school and what a coincidence she'd happened to bump into him on the beach

today after all these years. "Stupid fool," he thought. "There is no such thing as chance. Nothing is coincidence. God plans everything. He has a reason for each whisper, each song, each dream, each birth, each death. We are all ignorant fucks who cant possibly comprehend His reasoning."

The blonde girl put a cigarette to her mouth. He reached across the table to light it for her and as she cupped her hands around the flame, he could feel the fine hair on his hands stand on end and brush against her for half a second. She met his eyes only briefly in a sad smile. "She's missing someone" he thought. Someone who should be here is not. He pictured her lying in the arms of his father. Pictured his father's course hands untie the ribbon of black and stroke the blonde hair, kiss the broken nails, mend the hurt. His father shouldn't have gone away. He should have been there.

The tall one reminded him of the interviewers he listened to on the radio, asking him his name, where he lived and what he did for a living. Maybe the writing should be blue not black. He liked the word blue. The way it rolled off his tongue like a breaking wave. Perhaps he would have the card say "Blue Originals"

"A sculpture? Wow! What do you sculpt?" He showed the tall one the medallion he wore around his neck on a leather thong. It was a tiny hand clasped around a crystal. He sculpted hands. Hands showed the hurt. "It's so intricate, so beautiful," she said. He supposed in a strange, somewhat

twisted sense that agony could be beautiful. The blonde, in her obvious anguish, was beautiful, her fingers elegant. He would sculpt them out of blue femur when he went home. His mother had been beautiful. Sometimes at night he had dreamt of her enlarged breasts and how they felt when alone they clung to each other. In the morning he would wash his own pajamas. He was twelve then, twenty-three now. If goldfish lived as long as humans, Tico would be eleven.

When he closed his eyes he saw stars, stars like the time his father hit him, stars swimming like golden fish. "I think every time a star falls, someone is born and someone dies," he said aloud. He couldn't keep his thoughts straight, couldn't help but see the fish swimming in his head even when he covered his eyes with his hands. The blonde seemed intrigued by the stars and debated with him whether the absent moon was in Japan or Australia. They discussed which hemisphere people might be walking and breathing upside-down. They agreed their own position was horizontal. He felt dizzy again and gripped the arms of his chair for support and to keep from slipping. The tall one stopped prattling and the three sat smoking in silence: the blonde missing a philosopher or may be just the idea of one, the tall one listening to the band, and he concentrated on not falling off the earth.

"I'll kick you off the fucking planet," his father had screamed at his mother. She had wept, pleaded, cowered

from his father's flailing, loveless hands while he had cowered in the corner during his father's rage. Don't touch the tank. Don't hurt my fish. The fish can't live if the glass tank is smashed.

His father had gone away. He didn't come back. His mother's stomach shrunk in size though her breasts had remained full. He had always wanted a fish tank like the one at school, but he didn't have any fish to put in it.

He borrowed a pen from the tall one and tearing a napkin in half, scrawled "Eric's Originals." His phone had been disconnected because he couldn't pay the bill. He wrote the number of his roommate's private line on the bottom. "Will you call me sometime?" Both girls looked at him. "Yeah sure." answered the tall one. He handed the paper to the blonde. Watched her hands close around it. She wouldn't hold onto it nor would they ever call. He couldn't remember why he came. "Goodbye." he said. Goodbye, they smiled. It was such a sad word, maybe it was better to leave without saying goodbye. He'd never said hello to Tico; how could he say goodbye?

He remembered he'd forgotten to tie the horse up, and it seemed to have wandered away, most likely seeking shelter from the rain that was falling steadily now. He stopped at the Store 24 for Marlboros, chocolate milk and fish food before meandering home on foot through the rain.

Turning up the amp, his hands, his fingers strummed

a blue base on the guitar, his pounding head the drums, his eyes revealing the veiled lyrics. He should have been a writer. He should have written a children's book. Children cry when goldfish die.

Claire Antoszewski

Period Pieces

He moved from Speed to Speedway in thirty-six years, and as far as he could tell, Speedway wasn't proving to be too great a place. The streets all ran straight, just like the people. The houses were cut out from the same pop-up set, and even though he knew from the never-ceasing mounds of crap that appeared on the unkempt frontlawn that at least eight dogs inhabited the street, only one chocolate labrador retriever, named Dudley, ever yowled. It was as if the release of his primeval pangs would appease the others' allotted needs.

Once a year the place spilled over its brim for the Indy-500, and that was the only time that Speed and Speedway had anything in common. The faces in the crowd moved by in amusement park waves, from squat to drawnout, oblong with o-shaped mouths to a fleeting glance at perfection in a momentary mirror. He had worked at the Indy parking lot ever since the painting business, as Judy called it, closed up for vacation. The pay he made during the race put a smile on Judy's face, since little Maria could have new school clothes, but that was not why he did it. From above the two hundred foot stone wall that showed its backside to all of the parking attendants in its "kiss my ass" stance, he could hear the speed. He had always thought that speed moved like geometric rays and made whizzing, whirring noises, and yet, this speed wafted. It moved like processed cotton candy, unnaturally

turning over itself in the metal basin of the machine. Each consecutive year the new guys at the lot would comment on the distortion of the sound, on how ugly it was, and on how it gave them a headache worse than their worst hangover. They were a bunch of high school kids looking to make a couple bucks to party on, and they gathered together on the hood of some visitor's Buick, smoking butts and exchanging notes on which chickee was better than her best friend Ashley. Male bonding, some would say. Locker room talk, girls would say. Karoly just knew they were wrong; wrong about the girls, and definitely wrong about the sound of the speed. It had long ago ceased being ugly and painful. The speed was sweet and sugary. The greatest paradox of all was that the speed he overheard in the Indy parking lot, at the job that he took on when his paint had dried, was the only earthly sound that could inspire him to work.

The week of the Indy-500 was a furious frenzy of blue and orange and purple, when the garage door, the door to his makeshift studio, creaked open to allow in shards of light. He felt almost like he was floating above the earth in that garage. The clouds of dust gathered at his exposed ankles like cushions around the gods' small, shapely feet when they sit on Mount Olympus and drink nectar. He had a paintbrush, and that made him equal. He would traverse from corner to corner of the square space, lifting drop cloths away from his art. Framed and unframed, it was a complete collection, with the

exception of two works and those that inevitably were lost when the family emigrated from Hungary. But the two works were affectionately termed the Masterworks, since they were the only paintings Karoly had ever sold. He had really only liked one of the pair, a painting that Judy named "The Lady with the Big Bum". It was a derogatory name for a Masterwork, but Karoly never argued about it. His red temper would have cartoonishly risen beyond the height of his body, and the threadlike network of veins in his cheeks would flare as if they would jump out of his skin to join the cobwebs, and he would have blurted out that it was a portrait of her. Judy-poor, nine-to-five, palmolive Judy- whose epileptic fits were the sole things that kept her from her middle-class American dream, could never have understood that the painting captured the "essence of woman in repose", like the neighbor's divorcee cousin had. It had transcended a woman with a big bum; it transcended Judy, because she didn't hear the speed.

Around the garage were canvases that dated as far back as Visual Studies II at the University of Indiana in the mid-sixties. The scenes themselves, though unrecognizable even to a witness' eye, dated back much earlier. Small dogs darted through ramshackle yards, their nails grating against the metal property fences that were put up in the hope of protecting the family. As if the jelly cans that shot through the sky with excellent speed would be frightened away by metal fences and shrill admonishments of overfed housepets. Streets, blistered

and flaking from the heat of fire, and those ambulances that careened around corners and down his streets with immortal speed. And bridges. A bridge leading to a bridge leading to anywhere? He remembered that first motorcycle ride. It was an American experience, riding as free as a goddamn bird, barely bound to ground and praying every second that the bridge would extend a few feet further. He bought a motorcycle after that, to try to recapture the speed. He bought a motorcycle with government money; the money they were paying him to guinea pig some of their own speed.

Motorcycles became secondary. All that remained was his art, and the speed that delivered his art. Karoly compared it to child birth, something pure and miraculous. Judy hated those paintings the most. It was the only time in life that he didn't search for subject matter. It was always vibrating his fingertips and guiding his paintbrush on the ominous blank canvases.

One painting stood out: an imitation classic that had been required in one of his courses. He had chosen to paint a Monet seaside scape, since he admired Monet's technique of applying large amounts of paint and still capturing precise details. As an imitation, it was a success. He came out of the course with an A-, and so he set the seascape to rest on a standing easel that faced out the window.

A week later he swore that he could hear the crashing of waves, though it was over five hundred miles to the ocean.

In the pale natural light, Karoly expectantly turned the easel with his knobby right hand. It was swimming with motion, and his hand passed through the canvas as he reached out to feel the paint. It was liquid, liquid speed. He chose the finest brush he owned and began to paint his knobby right hand, then his arm and chest, and legs and toes, until he was seated in a fisherman's sloop, keeping precarious balance.

No one saw him for five days. He finally called his big brother Stephen in Boston, who had always bailed him out and now sent nothing but holiday cards and hand-me-downs. He was allowed one phone call. They said he threw a punch at a priest in Saratoga Springs. He'd refused to marry Karoly and a woman named Barbi, who had hennaed red hair that swept around her cheeky face like a blanket, because he didn't have an in-state driver's license. His nose was bleeding. The Monet imitation had a hole the size of a fist punched through it.

But it wasn't even Indy season in Speedway now. He looked up sharply as the screen door and side door clanged in succession and Dudley howled at the moment that the doors were open. His gypsy music was too loud. The neighbors would sidle around the hedge tomorrow as they glimpsed Judy going off to her nine-to-five life, and sidle around a complaint that the gypsy music was too loud. She would be apologetic and the conversation would end in a discussion about the carpool schedule for swimming lessons at the Y. Karoly

wondered why even Dudley could not appreciate the discordant sound of an off-key string amidst the harmony and parallel streets. There was no way to move with speed in Speedway. Even on parallel streets that ran straight, there were stop signs at every corner, and cross walks and decrepit crossing guards.

Karoly raised his arm and appraised the fine-blown wine glass that he held delicately in his fingertips. In a hasty and crass motion, he made a final swallow of the beeswing. The wine had been a syrupy Tokaj, but the beeswing was bittersweet. It permeated the tongue cells that bubble out incongruously from their assigned shape, and stung them. He lifted the glass to eye-level as the violins played closer and closer to his ear. He observed Judy, as she sat domestically knitting, click-click, a doll for little Maria. The doll's white-stockinged legs growing so long that only they could span the distance growing between the two sides of his glass.

Tina Ver

The Courant

Submissions to *The Courant* are accepted throughout the school year. *The Courant* publishes once each term, three times a year. Manuscripts should be submitted with your name printed on the backside of the first page. We ask that your name not appear on the front of any pages of text. We would also appreciate your numbering of multi-page submissions. Ideally, you should have your submissions stored on disk as we cannot always guarantee the return of manuscripts. We encourage submissions of more than one poem and/or story. Manuscripts not selected for one issue may be included in a later one.

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Contributors

Lucas Edwards

Tina Ver

Colin DeYoung

Claire Antoszewski

Paolo Bilotta

Leila Jones

Brett York

Heather Birks

Chris Murphy